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# Gender and the Receptivity of Individuals to Blind Self Feedback

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**Abstract**
This research looks at the intersection of three fields: receptivity to feedback, the blind self and feedback, and the impact of gender on feedback. The author's aim was to see how gender affects the ability of individuals to receive feedback about an aspect of themselves of which they are unaware. We had individuals simulate a situation in which they received feedback from someone they trust that they are racist, and complete a survey to gauge their receptivity to this feedback. Our findings confirmed that individuals are generally unreceptive to blind self feedback. Additionally, women were more receptive on average to blind self feedback than men, but the difference in receptivity was not statistically significant – this finding may be influenced by several key limitations. This study contributes to a very important field of research, because understanding one's own blind spots is critical to an individual's ability to grow.

**Keywords**
feedback, blind-self feedback, gender

**Disciplines**
Business

# Gender and the Receptivity of Individuals to Blind Self Feedback

by

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**Joseph Wharton Scholars Research Thesis**

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## 1. ABSTRACT

This research looks at the intersection of three fields: receptivity to feedback, the blind self and feedback, and the impact of gender on feedback. The author's aim was to see how gender affects the ability of individuals to receive feedback about an aspect of themselves of which they are unaware. We had individuals simulate a situation in which they received feedback from someone they trust that they are racist, and complete a survey to gauge their receptivity to this feedback. Our findings confirmed that individuals are generally unreceptive to blind self feedback. Additionally, women were more receptive on average to blind self feedback than men, but the difference in receptivity was not statistically significant – this finding may be influenced by several key limitations. This study contributes to a very important field of research, because understanding one's own blind spots is critical to an individual's ability to grow.

Keywords: feedback, blind-self feedback, gender

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Feedback is an everyday tool, but a powerful one that can lead to dramatic effects on our future performance, behaviors, and personal development. The goal of feedback is to provide post-response information to a recipient about their actual state of performance, behavior or learning, and to compare these states against the goals of the given context (Raemdonck, Strijbos, 2013; Narciss, 2006, 2008). Under certain circumstances, feedback can lead to increased performance and even greater personal development (London, 2003; Dominick, Reilly, McGourty 1997). However, feedback can also lead to unintended effects, as shown by Kluger and DeNisi's landmark study in which over one third of performance reviews led to decreased performance (1996). To understand some of the circumstances that affect whether feedback will lead to enhanced or reduced performance, we will provide a literature review of three areas of research that are crucial to understand the present research: receptivity to feedback, the blind self and feedback, and the impact of gender on feedback.

### 2.1 Receptivity to Feedback

Feedback involves an inherent tension for most people: feedback recipients want to learn valuable information that can help them improve, but simultaneously want to avoid threats to their self-concept (Porter, Lawler, Hackman, 1975; Karakowsky, Miller 2005). This reaction is known as ego defense, which can take many forms (Karakowsky, Miller 2005). For instance, one of the mechanisms of ego defense is known as switchtracking which occurs when feedback is given and the recipient immediately changes the subject (Heen, 2014). A number of other responses related to ego defense have been identified by researchers to allow recipients of negative feedback to maintain more favorable views of themselves and rationalize any negative comments received (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, Vredenburg, 1995; Taylor & Brown,

1988; Dunning, 2003; Critcher, Dunning, Armor, 2010). For example, people engage in downward social comparisons (Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001; Taylor & Lobel, 1989), view their own successes as unique and shortcomings as commonplace (Campbell, 1986; Marks, 1984), and dissociate their own specific deficits from broader implications for the self (Beauregard & Dunning, 2001; Wentura & Greve, 2003; Critcher, Dunning, Armor, 2010).

On the other hand, feedback recipients may choose to be receptive to negative feedback. This can occur because of the context of the feedback; for example, individuals may be more receptive to negative feedback when it is clear to them that the long-term benefits of accepting the feedback outweigh the short-term negative emotions (Korsgaard, Meglino, Lester, 1997). Studies have also shown that recipient characteristics have an impact of the acceptance of negative feedback. Higher receptivity to feedback is associated with receiving feedback from someone of the same race (Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000), having higher self-awareness (Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000), knowing feedback givers before the feedback session (Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000), and perceiving that the feedback giver has a high level of expertise (Karakowsky, Miller, 2005; Callendar, 1996).

There are signs that an individual will be more receptive to feedback. Feedback-seeking behavior can sometimes indicate receptivity towards negative feedback, unless the feedback seeker is only trying to hear praise without criticism (Karakowsky, Miller, 2005). Another study found that managers who met with the subordinates who gave them feedback were more like to be receptive to this feedback and take steps to improve (Walker, Smither, 1999). Moreover, individuals who start a developmental dialog upon receiving feedback are most likely to demonstrate a resilient change in their behaviors over time (Callendar, 1996).

### 2.2 Blind Self and Feedback

Individuals tend to believe that they know themselves better than others know them (Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, Ross, 2001). However, there is increasing evidence that this is not the case because of the "blind spots" that we have when it comes to evaluating our personalities and behaviors (Vazire, Carlson, 2011; Gallrein, Carlson, Holstein, Leising, 2013; Atwater, Waldman, Brett, 2002). Exhibit 1 displays the Johari Window which models interpersonal awareness developed by Luft and Ingham (1995). This is a popular model used to facilitate conversations, and has even been made into a board game to help friends learn more about each other and themselves ("KnowMe Interactive Games"). The open area, also known as the "area of exchange", consists of "perceptions, understanding, and knowledge of relevant information held in common by both mediation parties" (Bultena, Ramser, Kilker, 2011). The blind area, which is of particular interest in this paper, reflects behaviors, personality traits or attitudes that we demonstrate, but of which we are unaware. To explain the blind self through an example, a study done of domestic abuse victims found that while all victims had temporal consciousness of their abuse, several were unable to recognize the abusive character and could not identify that what they experienced was abuse – they were blind to this recognition (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, Kroll, Duncan, 2011). Indeed, there is valid evidence for the existence of blind spots in individuals' self-concepts because of the discrepancy between the target's and others' views of who the target truly is (Gallrein, Carlson, Holstein, Leising, 2013).

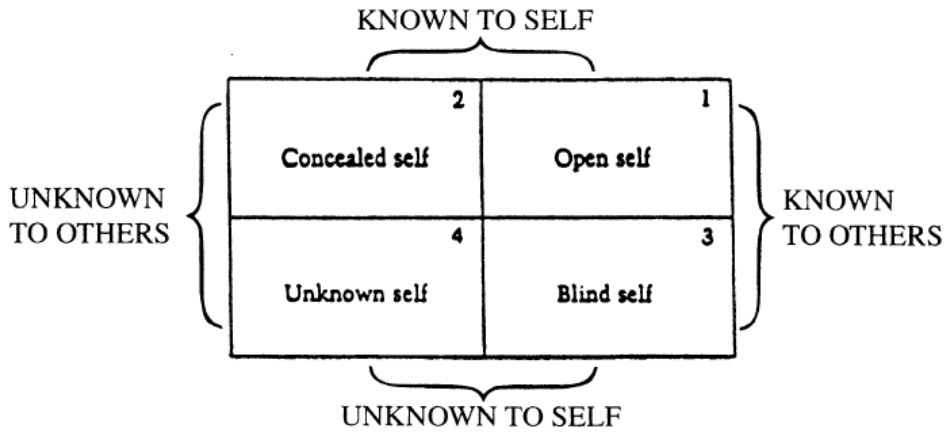


**Exhibit 1**: Parts of a Person (Schein, 1999)

One way to reduce the size of an individual's blind area is through feedback (Bultena, Ramser, Kilker, 2011). If negative feedback about areas in the open-self is hard to receive as described in Section 1.1, feedback given to the blind self is even more difficult (Schein, 1999; Diangelo, 2015). While there are not many studies that document moderators for receptivity to blind self feedback, self-other agreement plays a significant role in the relationship (Ostroff, Atwater, Feinberg, 2004). Self-other agreement refers to the similarity between how we rate our performance and behaviors compared to others, and is found to be positively related to supervisory ratings of performance (Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino, Fleenor, 1998; Ostroff, Atwater, Feinberg, 2004).

### 2.3 Feedback and Gender

Women are generally more open to feedback than men. There are several theories proposed to explain this. Firstly, women more open to feedback because more concerned about interpersonal relationships and more sensitive to others' opinions than are men (London, Larsen, Thisted, 1999). Moreover, research proposes that men tend to be more concerned with their ego than women, which engenders more ego defense when negative feedback is given (Eagly, 1987).

There is also evidence that men and women perceive feedback differently. Women tend to view feedback as more controlling, while men tend to view feedback as informational (Pittman, Davey, Alafat, Wetherill, Kramer, 1980; Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000). Additionally, women demonstrate greater responsiveness to feedback than men because they are more likely to alter their subsequent self-appraisals to reflect what they learned from their feedback (Ostroff, Atwater, Feinberg, 2004; Roberts, Nolen-Hoeksema, 1989). Lastly, men are more likely to have less self-other agreement as they tend to overrate their abilities on self-appraisal performance evaluations (Brutus et al., 1999; London, Wohlers, 1991; Roberts, Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994).

## 3. PRESENT RESEARCH

For my research, I will examine individuals' receptivity to feedback given to the blind self, and how gender affects this receptivity. I hope that looking at the intersection of these three areas of research will yield an exciting addition to the existing literature on feedback.

As described in Section 2, research has examined individuals' receptivity to feedback, individuals' blind selves, and the impact of gender on receiving feedback. Only occasionally has research focused on the intersection of two of these areas, but never all three. For example, a study analyzed the impact of gender on the blind self and found that women tend to be in agreement with people who assess their qualities whereas men tend to overrate their qualities (Ostroff, Atwater, Feinberg, 2004). Moreover, gender was found to have no impact on one's awareness of their blind self (Esposito, 1978), but this study's methodology was later proved invalid (Shapiro, Hell, Hager, 1983).

Although this research will have significant implications for work settings, I want to focus my methodology on non-work environment relationships. As I describe in Section 7, I was inspired a friend's relationship problems to write this paper which made me want to pursue a more generalized setting of feedback. Moreover, there are significant flaws with performance reviews and gender. For example, women tend to be rated lower than men for demonstrating the same behaviors in the workplace (Butler, Geis, 1990; Ostroff, Atwater, Feinberg, 2004). Thus, by avoiding the work setting context, I will avoid using blind self feedback that has different meaning for members of each gender.

# 4. METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 Participants

Subjects for this study were recruited through Mechanical Turk. Subjects received $0.85 for participating in this study and we surveyed 150 subjects consisting of 70 females and 80 males.

## 4.2 Control Variables

The first step of the procedure is to ensure that certain control variables are met. Emotional state of the recipient can affect their ability to receive feedback adequately (Johnson, Connelly, 2014), so we began the study with an encouraging message to put them in a mildly positive state and control for differences in emotional state. Moreover, we stipulated that every participant be a US resident with at least some work experience – this somewhat controls for culture because many of the users have theoretically adapted to the same cultural norms. This is important as culture is a moderator of receptivity to feedback (Sully de Luque, Sommer, 2000). The sample of participants was not normally distributed for demographic details such as race, wage level, career length, marital status, and education level, so care will be taken to adjust for these factors in our analysis if they prove to have a significant effect.

## 4.3 Materials and Procedure

First, we retrieved background information about the participants' gender, age, career length, marital status, ethnicity, education level, and wage level.

The next part of the procedure involves giving the blind self feedback to the participants. It is important to have the feedback giver be someone who the participant trusts in order for the feedback to be perceived as valid (Karakowsky, Miller, 2005; Callendar, 1996), so we asked participants to identify someone who they are close with and imagine they are in a conversation.

We then had the participants read feedback about their blind self as if they are hearing the feedback from the person they previously identified. Inspired by an article by Diangelo (2015), we used structural racism as the feedback given to the blind self. Because of stigma, this is an area with which individuals try to not associate; however, Diangelo accurately points out that "structural understanding recognizes racism as a default system that institutionalizes an unequal distribution of resources and power between white people and people of color" (2015). Thus, this was a way of standardizing blind self feedback given to all participants of the study.

To measure the participants' receptivity to the feedback, we administered a recipient questionnaire and freeform response. The recipient questionnaire gauged each participant's receptivity to the blind self feedback. The exact questionnaire will be a modified version of the questionnaire developed by Ryan and his colleagues (Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000). This study distilled questionnaires used in previous studies to gauge receptivity to feedback and made modifications to have a more personal development focus (Nemeroff, Wexley, 1979; Russell, Goode, 1988; Silverman, Wexley, 1984). This development focus fits with this study which is not professionally-oriented, and was modified and adjusted to fit the blind self feedback rather than open self context of feedback. Questions included "I am satisfied with the feedback" and "The feedback I received was accurate"; each question employed a seven-point Likert-type agree or disagree response format (Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000). Lastly, the scale used by Ryan et al. consists of ten items with an alpha of 0.87, and we will ensure high internal reliability with our modified survey to gauge the receptivity of the individual to blind self feedback (Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000).

The procedure will also include a free response section asking participants to document their response to the blind self feedback. This information will be coded using a similar coding

scheme to previous feedback receptivity studies (Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000). This coding scheme will involve a set of tallies that take into account the frequency of certain behaviors, such as disagreeing with the feedback (Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000) or engaging with the feedback giver and asking questions to try to improve (Walker, Smither, 1999; Callender, 1996).

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## 5. HYPOTHESES

This study is unique in that it examines the intersection of individuals' receptivity to feedback given on the blind self, and how gender affects this receptivity. Even if there is no existing literature that examines this intersection, hypotheses can be drawn from existing research.

First of all, feedback to the blind self is difficult to receive. As mentioned earlier, individuals develop responses to negative feedback such as the switchtrack reaction (Stone, Heen, 2014) to promote ego defense. It is even more difficult to be receptive to blind self feedback as these are areas of ourselves that we do not even recognize. For these reason, we expect to find on average less receptiveness.

> **Hypothesis 1:** Participants of both gender will tend to be unaccepting of blind self feedback.

When gender comes into the equation, we can develop hypotheses based on research considering gender's effect on receptivity to regular feedback. As discussed in Section 1.3, women are more likely to be receptive to feedback (Pittman, Davey, Alafat, Wetherill, Kramer, 1980; Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000) and to have score that reflects the past opinions of others (Ostroff, Atwater, Feinberg, 2004; Roberts, Nolen-Hoeksema, 1989). We believe that this receptivity to general, open self feedback will extend to blind self feedback.

> **Hypothesis 2:** Females will be more likely than males to be receptive of feedback to the blind self.

# 6. RESULTS

## 6.1 Analysis of Responses

Using the Mechanical Turk platform, we collected 150 responses to our survey, with 80 male responses and 70 female responses. We rejected submissions that were incomplete or that did not cohere. For instance, a submission in which that career length in years was greater that the stated age of the respondent was rejected.

In our methodology, we used a survey to measure receptivity to blind self feedback that was modified from a similar survey used by Ryan and his colleagues (2000). Please see Appendix A for the full survey and note that the last two Likert style questions were reverse coded for our analysis. We calculated the Cronbach's alpha with the data that we collected in order to determine the internal reliability of the questions in our survey, and found that the Cronbach alpha for our modified survey was 0.82. Indeed, removing any questions would not improve the Cronbach alpha measure, so we chose to keep all question responses in our data set for analysis.

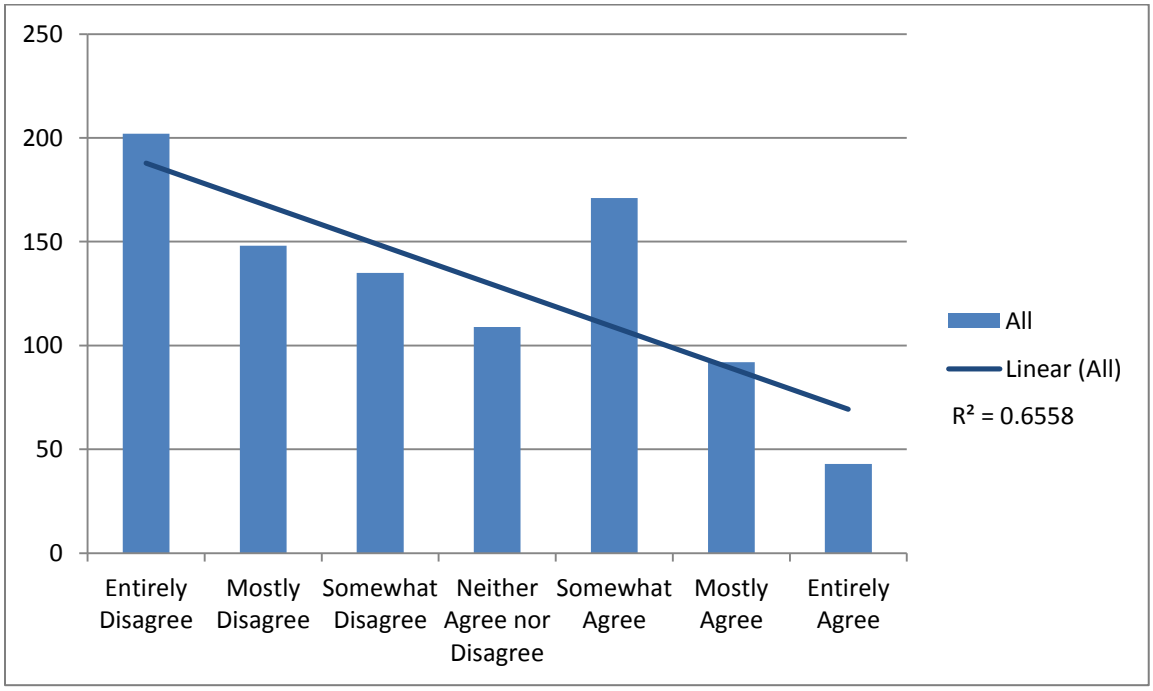
Our survey employed a seven-point Likert scale with possible answers ranging incrementally from "Entirely Disagree" to "Entirely Agree" (see Appendix A). One point of consideration for our analysis was how to interpret the Likert data given the longstanding debate about whether or not parametric statistics can be used with Likert data. Likert scales yield ordinal data because respondents indicate the degree to which they agree with certain statements. Unlike interval data, the distance between ordinal data answers is more difficult to interpret; for instance, "Neither Agree Nor Disagree" is not necessarily twice as much as "Mostly Disagree" (Sullivan, Artino, 2013). However, consensus seems to suggest that either non-parametric or parametric tests will yield sufficient results for Likert data. A study found that you can still use

parametric tests and find robust answers, even when the statistical assumptions are violated (Norman, 2010). Therefore, we can use both parametric and non-parametric tests to analyze our data.

### 6.2 Blind Self Feedback Receptivity

Exhibit 2 below summarizes the frequency of responses for the survey questions for each gender. This frequency bar chart confirms Hypothesis 1 that participants of both gender will tend to be unaccepting of blind self feedback. The evidence for this can be seen in the downward trendline with $R^2$ value of 0.66, suggesting that all respondents are less likely to agree with the characterization of themselves as racist. Moreover, the median response for the questions on the survey is "Somewhat Disagree". This again confirms our first hypothesis that, on average, people resist blind self feedback.

**Exhibit 2**: Frequency Chart of All Responses

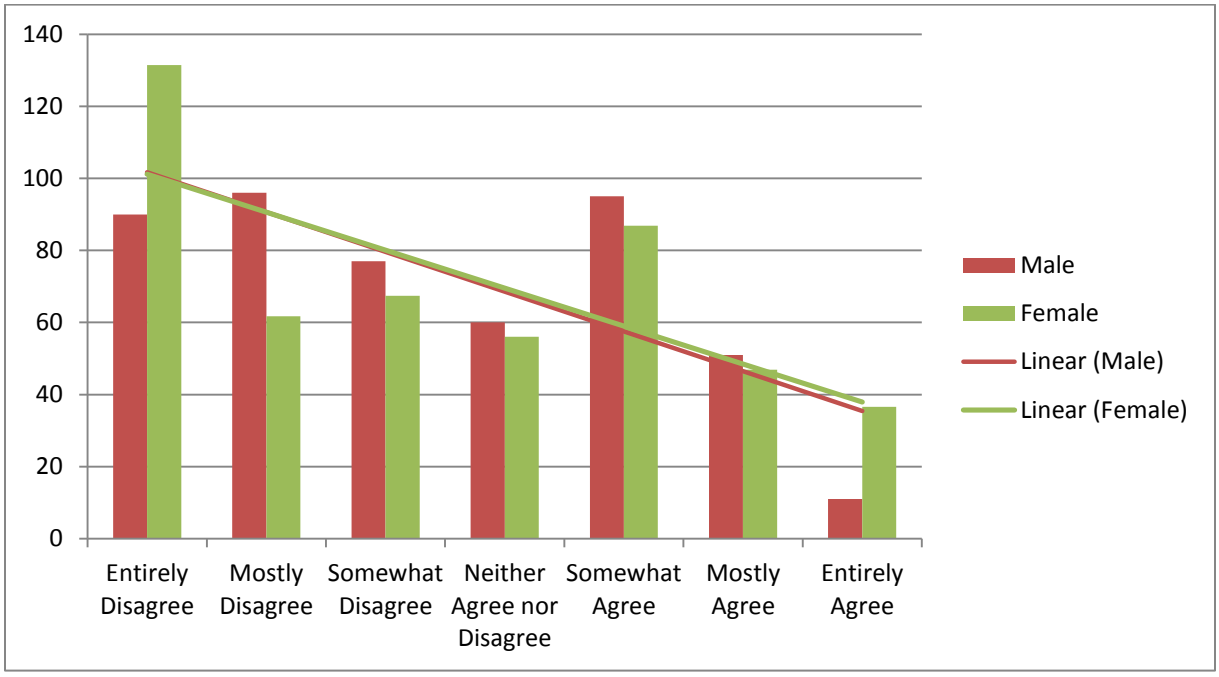


### 6.3 Gender as a Moderator to Blind Self Feedback Receptivity

Exhibit 3 summarizes the breakdown in responses to the survey by members of each gender. As there were fewer female than male respondents, we normalized the frequencies to account for this discrepancy. The trendlines for each gender's responses show that each gender is generally not; the $R^2$ values are 0.52 and 0.60 for the female trendline and male trendline respectively.

While the frequency of scores suggests that women are on average more receptive to blind self feedback than men, we need more thorough testing. The frequency chart has several interesting features such as the much higher female frequencies for "Entirely Disagree" and "Entirely Agree" – this suggests that women feel more polarized in their reactions to blind self feedback. The median rating for both males and females was "Somewhat Disagree", so no difference between the response of the two genders can be seen through the comparison of the medians. Additionally, we conducted a Mann-Whitney test to determine if the difference between male and female responses was statistically significant, but the difference was not statistically significant. Thus, we cannot reject the null hypothesis, which claims that the two samples could be the same, because $p >> 0.05$.

**Exhibit 3**: Frequency Chart of Male and Female Responses




### 6.4 Freeform Response Analysis

The freeform response section of the survey provided illuminating support to the results found through the Likert data. Please see Appendix B for a summary of the most interesting responses to the freeform response. We coded the freeform responses using a tallying system developed in previous research (Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000; Walker, Smither, 1999; Callender, 1996). For each response, we tallied whether the participant wrote that they would engage with the feedback giver, ask questions or seek additional information, or whether they would simply reject the feedback entirely. Exhibit 4 showcases a summary of our findings, scaled appropriately to account for the greater number of male participants than female:

**Exhibit 4**: Frequency of Behavior seen in Freeform Responses

| | Seek More Information | Engage with Feedback Giver | Reject Completely | Average Number of Characters in Written Response |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 27 | 38 | 42 | 162 |
| Female | 22 | 39 | 41 | 172 |

These findings supports our claim that the differences in behavior between males and females are not significantly significant. Indeed, the number of male or female participants who sought more information, engaged with the feedback giver, or rejected the feedback completely were almost identical. One slight different is that females on average wrote more in their freeform responses than males. This may suggest a greater sense of duty to respond to blind self feedback, which is consistent with findings that women tend to view feedback as more controlling, while men tend to view feedback as informational (Pittman, Davey, Alafat, Wetherill, Kramer, 1980; Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000).

**6.5 Limitations**

As with any study, there are several key limitations to our study that influenced the conclusions we reached. First of all, the sample of people who completed our survey was less diverse than we had hoped, which could skew our findings. For instance, 80% of our participants were white, with very few respondents representing minorities. Indeed, the average black participant's receptivity to the feedback was higher than the average white participant. This is problematic because an entire study could be conducted on the effect of ethnicity on an individual's ability to receive blind self feedback. Therefore, future studies should be more careful to ensure a more diverse sample for conducting this survey.

When we gave blind self feedback in the form of telling participants they are racist, we assumed that participants would not self-identify as racist. This is a limitation to our study because several participants did self-identify as racist (see Appendix B for examples).

Lastly, there are issues with collecting data through Mechanical Turk. The overriding problem with collecting data through Mechanical Turk is that data can be significantly less reliable because workers tend to have low attentiveness to the task or survey which they are

completing (Rouse, 2014; Berinsky, Huber, Lenz, Alvarez, 2012). Studies show that asking respondents to affirm that they were attentive and honest is associated with more reliable responses (Rouse, 2014), so in the future we would include such a question in our survey.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The literature available on feedback is vast and plentiful, but has never examined the intersection of individuals' receptivity to feedback, individuals' blind selves, and the impact of gender on receiving feedback. This research paper fills this gap. This will lead to significant takeaways for relationships, work environment, and potential future research.

The findings of our study revealed that, indeed, people resist blind self feedback on average. Although on average women were more receptive to blind self feedback than men, the difference were not statistically significant. This may be due to some limitations discussed in section 6.5 above. For instance, collection of data through Mechanical Turk can yield unreliable results because participants generally have low attentiveness to the survey being taken.

I was inspired to pursue this research by a friend going through relationship problems. Her boyfriend was completely unreceptive to blind self feedback, yet he gave her feedback about her blind self she was very receptive and eager to know how to change. My background research and conversations about blind self feedback have led me to realize just how important this area of research is. I fully realized just how important blind self feedback is in grave situations upon reading a study about domestic abuse victims who knew the physical trauma they had endured, but could not name the trauma as "domestic abuse" (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, Kroll, Duncan, 2014). I hope that this paper helps to provide more clarity about the factors that impact an individual's receptivity to feedback in relationship settings.

To date, only medical professionals have embraced the campaign to become more self-aware by reducing blind spots and being open to feedback to the blind self (Jack, 2007; Halpern, 2009). However, this process of reducing blind spots is an important, challenging part of growing as an individual and building relationships. Indeed, being able to become self-aware and

improve upon blind spot weakness is a fundamental aspect of having a growth mindset and, as Dweck demonstrates, virtually all great people have this mindset (2006).

There is an ongoing conversation that as women enter the workforce in greater numbers than the past, the result is not a zero-sum game in which women take what men traditionally had (Sandberg, Grant, 2015). Women offer unique vantage points and skills. If my hypotheses prove to be true, my research would point to another unique skill of women – the ability to better receive feedback to the blind self. In the current work environment, there are many threats to the way business has traditionally been conducted with the Fight for Fifteen, rise of globalization, and ever-changing technological environment. These changes will force leaders to face tough situation and will likely involve feedback to these leaders about facets of themselves about which they are unaware. For this reason, the ability to listen, receive, and transform based on blind self feedback will prove to be a tremendous advantage.

Future research can expand upon this research in several ways. First of all, future studies could look at the impact of gender on teams' abilities to receive feedback to the blind self. While studies have examined how mixed gender groups respond to negative task performance (Karakowsky, Miller, 2005), examining the group's initial receptivity to feedback about areas of their team about which they are unaware would yield relevant results. This persistence and tensility would show the robustness of the team.

I would also like to follow up this research by analyzing the potential downsides of an individual's ability to receive blind self feedback. Given that the blind self is an area about which we are unaware, it seems that it could lead to dangerous results if the feedback was not actually true. Especially since women tend to view feedback as more controlling, while men tend to view

feedback as informational, giving untrue blind self feedback could have negative consequences (Pittman, Davey, Alafat, Wetherill, Kramer, 1980; Ryan, Brutus, Greguras, Hakel, 2000).

## 8. APPENDICES

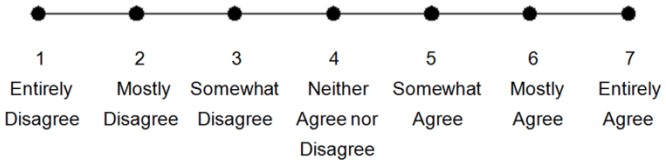
### Appendix A – Survey Questions

Think of someone close to you whom you trust (e.g. parent, spouse, close friend…).

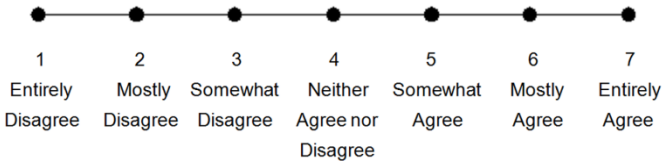
Imagine that you and the person you identified are having a conversation about racism. Imagine that the person you identified says to you: "You know, you are racist sometimes. Even though I know you don't think you're racist, I've seen you act in a prejudiced way toward people of minorities several times before."

Now, please select the response that most accurately describes how you feel in response to the following statements:

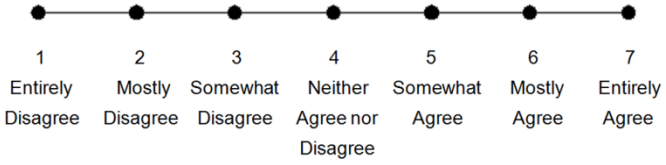
I feel satisfied with this interaction



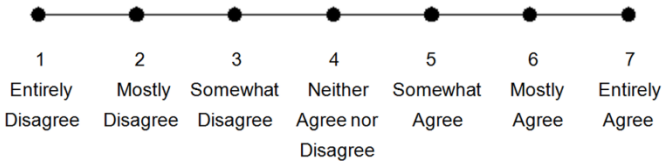

The feedback I received was accurate



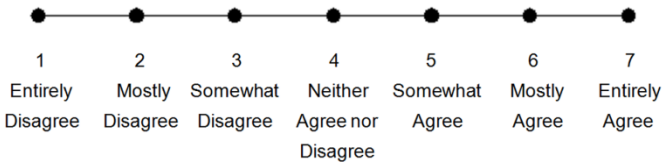

This interaction gave me a good idea of how well I am perceived by others



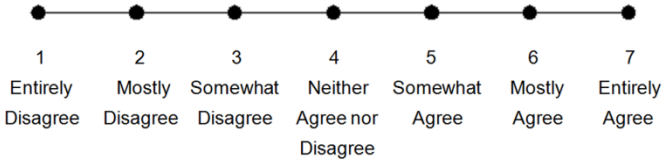

This interaction with this person made our relationship worse




I feel the interaction was unfair




I think this interaction helped me learn how to better present myself




Free response: “How did it feel to receive this message from the person you trust?”

**Appendix B: Some Select Freeform Responses**

- “I'm not sure how I can be racist if I am black. Blacks cannot be racist, which is an entirely different conversation.”
- “A racist does not need anyone to tell them they are a racist, they already know it.”
- “I am kind of racist because other groups act like idiots so this does not bother me.”
- “Fine, I hear this all the time actually. I do not care”
- “Completely betrayed. I have never been in the least bit racist or discriminatory to anyone for any reason and to be called that is entirely inaccurate.”
- “I would be very disappointed if someone told me I was racist. I work as a cashier in a retail store. I treat everyone, minority or not, the same.”
- “The person has white guilt obviously. I think the person I am with should mind their own business even though they are entitled to their own opinions. Let me out of it. You are not the ruler of me and my beliefs. Stop.”
- “I would call BS on that. I can’t help what others 'think' they know or how they want to judge me. I know what I am. I know I am not a racist and it is not for anyone else to say different. People are WAY TOO Politically correct and I can’t help that they are like that.”

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